

I am writing to express my strong disapproval of any relaxation or elimination of the public interest limits on media ownership. Localism and diversity are the cornerstones of a democratic media system, and we cannot afford to compromise them in any way.

Limits on media consolidation have been a bulwark against the concentration of economic power in the marketplace of ideas -- a critical part of balancing the public service mission of the media with their private profit motive. Our democracy requires the free flow of information from a broad range of diverse voices.

Any public policy seeking to protect diversity in the media must recognize the simple fact that ownership matters. Media consolidation has already led to declines in local and minority ownership as well as the homogenization of content in radio and television. Permitting cross-ownership of newspapers and broadcast stations, or allowing further concentration in local television markets, will only worsen the problems we already have.

When the FCC attempted to weaken and remove media ownership limits in 2003, millions of Americans rose up in protest. Congress and the courts ultimately intervened to turn back that misguided regulatory process.

Now that these same rules are being reconsidered, the FCC should stand firm with the public against further concentration of media ownership in the hands of the few. A vote against media consolidation is a vote for democracy.

To personalize this message a bit, the chilling effect of the damage done already is enough to bring tears to the eyes of any American. The corporate giants, who are concerned only about their profits and are completely unconcerned about the vapid content of their programming, have already dumbed down content enough. Further erosion of integrity resulting from loosening the few remaining constraints is unthinkable. The following is an Op Ed I have submitted (but was not published by the owning conglomerate) to our local newspaper regarding local news content as a result of media conglomeration.

NEWS OR JUST NEWSINESS: THE LEGACY OF MEDIA CONGLOMERATION

That news is important and that news matters is readily demonstrated in the adage that an informed electorate is necessary for the survival of a democracy.

Unfortunately, in broadcast television, both nationally and locally, news content has been lessened even though an overwhelming portion of the population acknowledges that television is their primary,

if not only, source for news. A recent study has concluded that, although there are more news outlets, there is, overall, less news being delivered.

A few years ago the Federal Communication Commission relaxed restrictions, thus allowing media conglomerates to control even larger numbers of media outlets, primarily affecting broadcast outlets. In Utah three of the four major over-the-air broadcast television stations are now owned by these corporate mega-giants, the fourth is locally owned and controlled.

These conglomerate-owned network affiliates have scheduled additional thirty minute blocks of evening news. Ideally, that would increase the amount of news broadcast. Paradoxically, with more air time, the newsworthy content in these programs has not increased, but seems to have drastically diminished. Apparently events now considered to be air worthy are mostly fire and police response situations with an occasional human interest story.

This is a time when international events are roiling and rapidly approaching critical mass. Washington D.C., the epicenter of our government, is caught in a spasm repetitively belching mountains of newsworthy dramas. Some aspects of the recent Utah Legislature efforts warranted significant scrutiny. These are the events that shape all of our lives, permanently and indelibly.

Inconceivably, local television news directors consider the most appropriate and informative content to be motor vehicle accidents, out of state high speed car chases, residential drug busts, spiced up with incessant chattering back-and-forth banter about unrelated topics.

It is understandable that programming additional blocks of local evening news, by being less expensive to produce, can improve the financial bottom line. Unfortunately, this cost-cutting blitzkrieg severely overshot any reasonable mark and seemed to have eliminated the support system (or research staff) that directed actual news content into the 12 to 15 minutes of air time available for news (leaving time for weather and sports).

There have been occasions when the local reporting on each station has raised much needed concern and action. Other spots have provided public awareness of potential safety hazards on the market or financial scams preying on the innocent and/or elderly.

The benefits, accolades and awards for these occasional items do not excuse the routine daily elimination or downgrading of newsworthy items. These recognitions ably demonstrate that our local stations are capable of much better quality work product.

This BREAKING NEWS crap is becoming tiresome and annoying! Just the fact that a fender-bender, drug bust, or even house fire is in progress does not qualify it as "breaking news." How do our

professional broadcast journalists keep a straight face when they deliver this hype? Utah has matured beyond the point that these items can be routinely justified as the most appropriate material for informative news content in a broadcast.

Having missed an evening news or nightly news broadcast, I have never gone to bed wondering about car crashes, drug busts and out-of-state police car chases. I have, however, wondered what happened in the world that might be important, effect my sensibilities or impact my life.

Although the ratings-grabbing philosophy of “if it bleeds, it leads” may be in operation, that pandering to the universal and primal hunger for gore and disaster does not grant permission to cannibalize the entire broadcast for a grand parade of more apparitions of the same caliber.

These “local” television stations are transmitting for free over airwaves owned by “we the people.” They seem to have forgotten that the founding and core principal of commercial broadcast television was that, in return for the free use of our airwaves, they would provide us with value and enlightenment in addition to entertainment.

Maintaining an informed electorate may not be easy, but it is important.

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For timeliness see Ted Koppel's remarks at
http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1002383931